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The CLASS™ Tool and Special Education Settings

The CLASS™ tool has not been specifically validated in self-contained special education classrooms; however, CLASS™ data indicate that the majority of classrooms studied included children with disabilities. For example, demographic data collected from classrooms that participated in the MyTeachingPartner™ study reveal that, on average, 11% of children in each classroom had an individualized education program.

The types of effective teacher-child interactions described by the CLASS™ tool are relevant for all children, regardless of ability level; however, the interactions may look different based on the nature of a child's special needs. For example, we gauge advanced language under Language Modeling differently if a child has a speech or language delay. Similarly, we would expect a teacher to employ different learning modalities for a student who is deaf or hard of hearing than she might for a hearing child—and scaffolding for a student with cognitive impairments may include physical prompting that is not needed for students who are typically developing.

While all of the dimensions of the CLASS™ tool apply to teaching children with disabilities, Teacher Sensitivity, Behavior Management, and Instructional Learning Formats are particularly relevant dimensions. Teachers must be consistently aware of and responsive to the individualized needs of students with disabilities. They constantly evaluate how well students are responding to instruction and adapt accordingly. Behavior Management is important, as young children with special needs engage in challenging behaviors at higher rates than do typically developing children, and older children with disabilities may engage in challenging behaviors as a manifestation of their disability (e.g., children with emotional and behavioral disorders). It is critical that teachers be proactive, clearly communicate expectations, redirect misbehavior, and consistently enforce rules. It may also be necessary to work with a behavior management specialist to create an individualized behavior management plan for that child.

The dimension of Instructional Learning Formats is important because teachers often need to individualize how they facilitate instruction to meet the diverse needs of their students. Children with a physical disability may need the teacher to physically assist them to participate in an activity. Children may respond to a teacher's questions not through verbal communication but through the means of assistive technology. Similarly, children with disabilities may require a range of modalities and materials (e.g., assistive technology for students with physical disabilities, a picture communication system for students with autism, large print or Braille for students with visual impairments, or auditory input for students with severe learning disabilities). Observers in these circumstances should be conservative in how they measure pacing under Productivity, as children with disabilities often need additional wait time in order to process and respond to instruction.

Even though we are highlighting the importance of these dimensions when observing children with special needs, it is important to emphasize that observers should not weight these dimensions more heavily than other dimensions: all CLASS™ dimensions are weighted equally regardless of classroom composition. Observers should not make exceptions or allowances based on the presence of a disabled child exhibiting behavioral challenges because CLASS™ scores are designed to capture the average child's experience in the classroom.

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The extent to which behaviors related to a child's disability should affect CLASS scores depends on several factors. For example, an observer may note that a child cries and screams throughout an observation cycle. The observer may not feel the need to take this into consideration during scoring because the observer knows that the child has autism and that this behavior is a manifestation of the disability. If the child's behavior is not impacting other children's experiences, then the observer is correct that this behavior should not affect the CLASS score. However, this scenario is unlikely. If a child with autism is constantly crying and screaming, the behavior likely is affecting the experiences of other children and taking up a disproportionate amount of the teacher's time, thereby affecting both the emotional climate in the classroom and Productivity.

Observers need to keep in mind that the CLASS tool is designed to provide an objective measure of what is happening in a classroom during the observation period; it is not intended to blame teachers for the child's behaviors. On the contrary, observers can use the CLASS tool to target professional development needs and as a jumping off point for discussing potential supports to help build Positive Climate and increase Productivity. In this way, classroom factors such as disability, diversity, and language status can guide the planning of effective teacher support.